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SUBJECT: GOS ROMA STRATEGY: INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

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This is the second in a series of cables on current GOS activities to address Roma issues.

1. Summary. Poor infrastructure, primarily housing, in settlements remains one of the worst problems confronting Roma in Slovakia. The level of development in each settlement varies, but most communities lack sewage systems, adequate access to clean water, and suitable housing. Both the GOS and EU designated financing for infrastructure projects in selected settlements in 2001, but the tendering process was delayed until early this year. A settlement's success in drawing from these funds was directly related to its relationship with the local mayor/government and the settlement's proximity to the village. Some settlements with the worst conditions may lose project funds because of local government delays, while other communities have shown improvements. End Summary.

Funding for Construction Delayed

2. Housing: According to a 2004 Ministry of Construction and Regional Development (MOC) report, the GOS budgeted 180 million SKK (5,538,461 USD) to build housing in Roma settlements. However, only 68 million SKK (2,092,307 USD) has been allocated for five settlements. The MOC blamed delays on problems with land ownership, project documentation, and construction permits. Two municipal governments declined construction proposals and 13 are not prepared to begin construction this year.

3. Infrastructure: The GOS received an extension in early 2004 for unspent European Union Regional Development funds, aka PHARE, for infrastructure projects such as water, roads, sidewalks, and sewage. The GOS pledged 8.4 million euro in co-financing in 2001, but the tendering process has been delayed until this year. The EU and GOS chose thirty settlements, but defined nine as risky due to the legal status of land and living conditions. As of April, the government had only contracted 19.6 percent of the total. In late July, the GOS announced tenders for 14 additional projects. Slovakia has until November 2005 to spend the remaining EU money.

Success and Failure: All Politics are Local

4. Poloffs recently visited Roma settlements in the Spis region and saw both success stories and failures. In Huncovce, a successful infrastructure project is nearing completion. The settlement is located near a main road, just across the stream from the village. It has benefited from the mobility of its citizens, who earn money in the Czech Republic and are thus able to contribute to the on-going investment in the settlement. The village has completed the EU PHARE funded roads and sidewalks and purchased additional land for future social housing funded by GOS sources. The mayor of Huncovce formerly owned a construction company and actively participated in the planning and execution of the projects. Community social workers stated that the settlements with projects already underway usually enjoyed good relations with the local government and were at a higher level of development than most other Roma communities.

5. Communities that the GOS has deemed "risky" at the beginning of the process exhibit behaviors that cause them to fall further behind. For example, in Letanovce and Svinia, local governments have opposed projects and residents protested construction fearing that improvements would attract large numbers of unemployed Roma. Letanovsky Mlyn, considered one of the worst settlements, is located 2.5 kilometers from Letanovce, where Roma claim residency. After blocking previously proposed government projects, four neighboring villages finally agreed to relocate the entire settlement away from a popular national park. The government awarded a contract for the technical preparation

of the project, but the various mayors are still arguing about the final location, further delaying construction (reftel B). The Svinia local government cancelled cooperation agreements with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Habitat for Humanity after disagreeing on single-family versus apartment housing. The MOC suggested choosing a different community for project funding.

Comment: Looking Forward

16. Even though the GOS finally made funds available for housing and infrastructure this year, local conditions in many communities obstructed real change. Local governments' decisions about housing took precedence over central government priorities, in part due to a lack of resources to support project development at the local level. Five new regional Roma offices under the Roma Plenipotentiary will begin operation this fall, and at least one will be led by a housing specialist. The offices are expected to give the GOS a larger role in problematic localities in order to ensure funds are equitably allocated. Also, they will prepare communities to absorb available funds next year to avoid losing the remaining money.

THAYER

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